
Break Rules. Break Bones: Ladder Safety

If you haven't seen it in person, then you've certainly seen the video. Many people seem to possess a poor-ladder-judgment gene. It causes them to try doing the most ridiculous ladder stunts (and also causes them to videotape themselves). While there are those who say, "Rules are made to be broken," when it comes to ladder safety, if you break the rules, you could break your neck or various other need-to-have body parts.

According to a study conducted by the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Columbus Children's Hospital, more than 2.1 million individuals were treated for ladder injuries between 1990 and 2005. That's more than 136,000 annually in the United States, and yet, ladder safety is rarely a major focus in the workplace or the public sector. Applying safety rules on all fronts is really a simple, common-sense practice, but for some reason, breaking the rules (or ignoring them completely) comes much easier.

Ladder Safety Rules!

Rule #1: Don't stand on the very top rung of a ladder.

No one ever listens to this rule. Seriously, if we're not supposed to step on them, why are they there? They're crying out to be stepped on. "Hey watch me stand on the top rung of this ladder!" OK, and then we'll watch you fall. It happens all the time. The top rung and the "seat" or "shelf" were not meant for standing or sitting. There are all sorts of balance issues that occur when someone tries to stand on these, and if there's nothing to hold on to for stability, it just gets worse. So don't do it!

Rule #2: Don't lean over the side of the ladder.

OK. How many times have you held on to that ladder for dear life and then reached and reached as far as you could for whatever it was you were trying to paint, wash, grab hold of, etc. Or how about standing with one foot on the ladder rung and then using your other leg to try to step over onto another surface! Reaching can cause the ladder to tip or wobble, and it can cause you to lose your balance. This is not a good idea, any way you look at it.

Rule #3: Don't set your ladder on an uneven surface.

And why would you? Actually more often the answer is why not? If the ladder is leaning severely in one direction, you can just lean the other way to even things out. No problem. Seriously, you are climbing this device because you need to get to higher heights, possibly while carrying things. Make sure it is on a flat surface. If it wiggles even slightly underneath you, it could cause you to startle, lose your balance and fall.

Rule #4: Don't prop a ladder on top of items to get more height.

People try balancing ladders atop all sorts of odd items in an attempt to make the ladder just a little bit taller. A ladder needs to be steady and well-supported before you climb it. Propping it on top of other items, or sticking it inside the bucket of a front-end loader, does not make for steady climbing and certainly it isn't safe. There is a reason why ladder manufacturers make ladders different sizes and heights. Make sure you use the right ladder for the job.

Rule #5: Don't use a broken ladder.

This seems like a pretty straightforward rule, but there are some who would look at a ladder that is missing rungs and wobbling all over the place, and say to themselves, "It's just fine." Well, chances are it's not. It could actually be incapable of holding your weight, let alone whatever cargo you are carrying, and then you could wind up on the ground with a broken leg, arm or worse.

Let the Rules Rule!

There are lots of rules for staying safe on a ladder. And following them is really your best bet for staying safe. When we're in a hurry, or just doing a quick job, we often think that rules are unnecessary, but they really are important. No matter how big or small the job, rules keep you safe.

Quick Tips

- A ladder should always be placed one foot away from the vertical support for every four feet of ladder height between the foot and the top support.
- Metal ladders must have dimpled or knurled rungs, or they must be treated for superior slip resistance.
- Use fiberglass or wooden ladders to help avoid electrical shock or electrocution.

Make sure that you inspect your ladder before every use. Check for damaged anti-slip feet on the bottom of the ladder, cracked or damaged welds, missing screws or rivets, weakened or missing rungs and other potential dangers.

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